
Is There A Public For Public Schools?



David Mathews

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Kettering Foundation Press

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PUBLIC SCHOOLS?**

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Kettering Foundation Press
200 Commons Road
Dayton, Ohio 45459

This book is printed on acid-free paper
First edition, 1996
Manufactured in the United States of America
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Mathews, Forrest David, 1935-
Is There a Public for Public Schools?
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical reference and index
ISBN 0-923993-02-9

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 96-76709
CIP

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P R E F A C E

After looking inside the public schools in a series of studies that culminated in John Goodlad's *A Place Called School* (1984), the Kettering Foundation became increasingly aware of the powerful influence on these institutions of forces outside their walls. Former Governor of Mississippi William Winter, a Kettering trustee, reported that the political will for the kind of reform initiative he had led in the early 1980s had begun to wane. And the late Lawrence Cremin, another trustee and a leading American historian of education, suggested that the foundation investigate what was happening to the social and political purposes that had driven the nineteenth-century commitment to public education.

Following these leads, we undertook a series of research projects on the public and its relationship to public education, eventually accumulating a sizable body of relevant work. Though we were initially reluctant to believe what we were finding, study after study — done by different researchers using different methods and investigating different sections of the country — led us to conclude that the public and the public schools were, in fact, moving apart, that the historic compact between them was in danger of dissolving.

The foundation is indebted to everyone who contributed to the effort,

especially those who helped bring the findings together in this book.

To Judy Suratt, editor-in-chief, who insisted on just the right word; to diligent research assistants David Moore, Kristin Cruset, Dana Boswell, and James Norment; to Kathy Whyde Jesse, a versatile writer and researcher who lives the issues in this book; to program officers Estus Smith, Gina Paget, and David Smith, who lent a guiding hand; to Angel George, who turned the words into type — the warmest thanks for a most productive collaboration.

To The Harwood Group, John Doble Research Associates, Public Agenda, and the others who carried out the bulk of the research, all credit for the substance of this report.

To the hundreds of citizens who brought their experiences and perspectives to the research, the greatest appreciation for sharing their deepest concerns and aspirations.

To the present trustees; to the other staff members and associates of the Kettering Foundation (where everyone's fingerprints are on everything that is produced), especially Ed Arnone and his crew, who got the manuscript into print in no time — a willing accounting of my debt to all of them.

C H A P T E R 1

PUBLIC SCHOOLS—OUR SCHOOLS

Is America committed to its public schools? Of course it is. That is what I've always believed and thought that everyone else did, too. If you ask Americans about their support for public schools, they usually say, "Yes, we need them" or "It's important that we have schools that are open to everyone." Public schools educate most of America's young people — some forty million of them. Kettering research suggests, however, that this commitment may not be as unequivocal as it first appears.

Some communities are blessed with good public schools. Some observers even argue that our public schools, overall, are doing a good job.¹ Yet the experience of most Americans tells them that the nation's school system is in trouble and that the problems are getting worse.² Our first reaction is to

1 Gerald W. Bracey, "The Fifth Bracey Report on the Condition of Public Education," *Phi Delta Kappan* 77 (October 1995): 149–160 and "Stedman's Myths Miss the Mark," *Educational Leadership* 52 (March 1995): 75–80.

2 The Harwood Group, *How Citizens View Education: Their Public Concerns and Private Actions* ([Dayton, Ohio]: Kettering Foundation, 1993).

blame teachers and administrators for a lack of discipline and a falling-off of standards. Our second is to recognize that schools are overwhelmed by social problems not of their making. We see the causes beginning in the decline of the family and extending to a breakdown of the norms of responsible behavior. What appears to be a web of interconnected problems prompts us to say that everyone has to rally round and pull together as a community in order to combat these threats.

But that isn't happening with the public schools — we aren't rallying round them. Instead of moving closer to these institutions, Americans are moving away. People without children sometimes deny any responsibility for the schools, saying that falls on parents. Parents, however, may feel accountable for their own children but not for children generally.

Unhappily, many Americans no longer believe the public schools are *their* schools, and yet this isn't a major issue today. On the contrary, all kinds of school reorganization go on with little regard for the effect on the relationship between the public and its schools. However reasonable in their own right, market-based reforms, court decrees, increased financial control by state governments, and professionally set standards may be putting citizens at an even greater distance from the public schools. That is the most alarming implication of more than ten years of research commissioned by the Kettering Foundation on the relationship between the public and its schools. Despite a long tradition of support for public education, Americans today seem to be halfway out the schoolhouse door.³

Even though 50 to 70 percent of Americans indicate support for their local public schools (perhaps because people have a better relationship with institutions that are close enough to affect), this statistic may tell only half the story, masking an erosion of the historic commitment to the idea of schools for the benefit of the entire community.⁴ People also like their local representatives in Congress better than they do Congress in general. But

3 The Harwood Group, *Halfway Out the Door: Citizens Talk about Their Mandate for Public Schools* ([Dayton, Ohio]: Kettering Foundation, 1995).

4 Stanley M. Elam, Lowell C. Rose, and Alec M. Gallup, "The 26th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes toward the Public Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* 76 (September 1994): 41–56.

erosion of confidence in Congress, indeed in our entire system of representative government, is both real and dangerous. By the same token, erosion of our commitment to a system of public schools should be taken very seriously. We need to listen to those who are saying that, while they would like to stand by the public schools, they can't.

My guess is that a breakdown of the contract between the public and the public schools may be one reason for the more obvious problems — dissatisfaction with the performance of the schools, difficulties in communication between administrators and the public, and lack of citizen participation. While these are all serious, a deterioration of the commitment to public education would call for more than improving test scores, doing a better job of communicating, or what is usually implied by “engaging the public.”

Why doesn't “engaging the public” go far enough? Because there may be no public waiting to be engaged. That is, there may be so few people supportive of the idea of public schools — so small a community for these inherently community institutions — that school reform may need to be recast as community building. In other words, certain things may have to happen in our communities before we can see the improvements we want in our schools.

Why isn't there a public for public schools today? Our research found what other studies have reported: while Americans believe the country needs public schools, they are torn between a sense of duty to support these schools and a responsibility to do what is best for children. They are ambivalent and agonize over the dilemma. And, however reluctantly, many are deciding that public schools aren't best for their children or anyone else's.

Part of their conclusion grows out of a perception that schools are so plagued by disorder that children can't learn. Although media hype and hearsay are often blamed for this perception, the people we talked to based their conclusions on personal experience or the experience of family members and close friends. Citizens complain that educators are preoccupied with their own agendas and don't address public concerns

about discipline and teaching the basics. This lack of responsiveness is part of what convinces people that the public schools aren't really theirs. The relationship citizens have — or don't have — with schools seems to affect the way they view them.

There are other reasons that people are moving away from public schools. While Americans still cling to the historic ideal that we should have schools open to all, the broad mandate that tied the schools to this and other social, economic, and political objectives seems to have lost its power to inspire broad commitment. People reason that, if the schools can't help individuals, they certainly can't help the larger community.

Surely another, and obvious, cause of the disconnect between schools and communities is that some schools don't have strong communities to relate to in the first place. Communities vary in civic spirit and vitality, and schools may not have much to connect with if they are located in an area where people's jobs and associations are elsewhere. How can schools serve a community's general interests if those interests haven't been established? Even districts or cities with rich civic histories may neglect to reaffirm public purposes, which must be reaffirmed constantly in order to remain legitimate. Because demographics change so frequently, yesterday's city may not be today's. While we recognize the necessity for a community response to the web of problems affecting education, creating a community that can pull together poses a substantial challenge.

On the basis of what we have heard from teachers and administrators, I think other obstacles to a better relationship between citizens and schools grow out of the unhappy experiences these educators have had with what they see as "the public." Educators complain that they are often captives of externally imposed reforms, with little or no voice. They are wary, and not without reason. Battered by interest groups, administrators become quite guarded, saying, in effect, "You can't just pull a group of people together from the community to tell educators what to do." They worry that citizens want to be involved in what they see as staff and faculty decisions. Educators also frequently equate the public with parents. And, while involving parents is essential, they are only a third of the citizenry.

In light of these feelings, it's no wonder that those trying to change schools sometimes give what one reporter described as lip service to public involvement. It's no wonder that reforms often fail, divided within by disputes between educators and other key actors and besieged without by angry interest groups.⁵ It's no wonder that, when educators talk about public engagement or community involvement, all they mean is using more effective ways of telling people what's good for them.

Given these circumstances, reclaiming the public schools would seem to be a responsibility that the public has to assume — although it would be a mistake to exclude educators.⁶ I am saying that fundamental change has to start with the public and within the community if it is to be effective against the structural impediments in school systems that tend to block that change. It is also unlikely that schools will change unless communities change, unless citizens increase their capacity to band together and act together.

I am arguing, as well, that there isn't any single reform that will do for all time. As I see it, schools will always have to adapt to new circumstances and challenges. Improvement must be habitual, so schools have to have the ability to keep on changing. The capacity for continuous adaptation is the mark of healthy people and healthy institutions. I am not suggesting that all reforms are likely to fail; some have made significant improvements in the curriculum and administrative organization of schools. I am talking about something else — about an enduring capacity or characteristic

5 Steve Farkas with Jean Johnson, *Divided Within, Besieged Without: The Politics of Education in Four American School Districts* (New York: Public Agenda Foundation for Kettering Foundation, 1993). While this study reports the failure of many recent reform efforts, it shouldn't be assumed that all reforms have been unsuccessful. Exceptional superintendents and principals, some academics, and citizen groups have sometimes had conspicuous success in changing particular schools. Yet even those reforms that are successful in achieving specific goals may not be building the kind of relationship with the public that increases the likelihood that reform will be ongoing.

6 This constitutes what Professor Ronald Heifetz calls a "Type III" problem, one that professionals can't remedy solely through their own resources. See Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1994), pp. 74–86.

feature of schools, which I believe is rooted in the communities that surround them.⁷

Communities themselves have to have the capacity to keep on adapting, to act and keep on acting. Their ability to do that is directly related to the quality of their public life, the kind of life and relationships citizens have with other citizens. Some communities have a rich public life; that is, they have a diverse network of civic associations organized for public work, opportunities for making decisions together, and traditions of cooperation that allow people to band together effectively. Other communities don't.

Scholars who see the public as a society of citizens and analyze the way it operates, or who have studied a community's civil society, have found important processes and key structures that we usually miss.⁸ So, in a book that puts so much emphasis on "the public" and "the community," I thought it essential to report on our best understanding of both. The fourth chapter gives more details on what makes public life vigorous and healthy and introduces a new paradigm for understanding our communities.

The character of public life may not strike you as relevant to what goes on in schools — but it is. There are any number of reasons why a healthy public life is essential to good schools. Two come immediately to mind. Strong communities, with people banded and pulling together, are our last line of defense against the breakdown of families and society. And they are also an essential source of "social capital," a necessary form of reinforcement from outside the school that encourages students to learn.⁹

Focusing on the health of a community's public life (or what is sometimes called the civil part of society) gives us another way to think

7 See Václav Havel's March 31, 1995, address at Victoria University in Wellington, New Zealand, reprinted in *New York Review of Books* 22 (June 22, 1995): 36–37. Here, Havel explains how he came (by way of Karl Popper's criticism of holistic social engineering) to see continuous incremental adaptation as the most desirable approach to ameliorating world problems.

8 These scholars include Robert Putnam at Harvard University, Vaughn Grisham at the University of Mississippi, and Douglass North at Washington University, St. Louis. Their studies are cited elsewhere.

9 James S. Coleman and Thomas Hoffer, *Public and Private High Schools: The Impact of Communities* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), pp. 221–233.

about “the public.” This perspective keeps us from equating the public with individuals, an audience, or even activists in interest groups; it directs our attention to the nature of the society in which citizens are embedded.

Because we have a different concept of the public or community, the strategy that follows from our research is quite different from the typical strategy for marshaling public support or increasing community involvement, which usually centers on enlisting key civic leaders and holding hearings for interested citizens, primarily for the purpose of winning support for schools. The public-first strategy we have in mind would work the other side of the street, actually deriving the mission for education from the purposes of the community. We think that schools as well as all other educational institutions should get their charters by “contracting” to reach public objectives. Standards or goals should be based on and directly related to community purposes rather than just professional criteria.

Our advice would be to start with the community or public, that is, to concentrate first on the community and its concerns rather than on the schools and their goals. We believe that schools are best understood as means to the broader educational objectives of a community and that well-intentioned reforms often reverse this natural order, treating the community as a means to ends dictated by schools. In effect, we propose retracing the steps that brought the public schools into being in the first place.

An obvious question: Are Americans interested in building stronger communities and regaining “ownership” of their schools? We have found that, although uncertain of what steps to take, many people are willing to act — if they can see a possibility of making a difference. The primary purpose of the foundation’s research is to develop materials citizens can use in order to make such a difference. For instance, Kettering is preparing issue books or guides for making difficult choices on community and educational issues, which are similar to the National Issues Forums (NIF) books. We think that learning to make choices together about how to act is an essential part of working together as a community.

As I end this introductory chapter, I would like to return to what I said earlier: the public is slipping away from the public schools, and no one seems to be paying much attention. If the relationship between citizens and what are supposedly *their* schools is weak, fragile, and in disrepair, the first thing we need to do is not weaken it further. If the supports for a bridge have deteriorated, you don't keep driving eighteen-wheelers over it.

Today, news stories about education are framed largely around controversies over financing, the quality of instruction, and the efficiency of administration — punctuated with dramatic accounts of drugs and violence in the schools. If these stories are a barometer, the key actors in education aren't paying attention to the relationship between the public and the schools or to what has happened to the mandate for public education. Headlines typically describe the latest curriculum reform, a reorganization that consolidates local boards, or a school's prediction of dire consequences if still another funding levy fails. Though all are legitimate reports, framing the coverage around these controversies misses the story behind the story. Are some of the solutions to problems of finance, equity, quality, and efficiency putting even more distance between the public and the schools? Is the debate over these issues itself driving citizens away? Our research suggests that people find the discussion of reform and reorganization too technical to be coherent, too removed from their concerns to be relevant.

If the schools are losing the public, as the research suggests, or if “public” schools mean little more today than schools paid for by taxes and controlled by boards of citizens, then no plan for reform or reorganization should be attempted without looking at its impact on what appears to be a very fragile relationship linking the public and the schools. Whatever its merits, any arrangement that makes our schools less public will have serious consequences — not only for schools but for an entire country that was organized around the expectation that there would always be public education to “complete the great work of the American Revolution.”

Who should assess the public impact of reform and reorganization? Why not the public?

Public Schools A public school is an independent secondary school. Public schools in England are not run by the government. The entrance exams used by most public schools are known as Common Entrance exams and are taken at the age of 11 (girls) or 13 (boys). The most famous public schools are Eton, Harrow and Winchester. Higher Education. Around 30% of the 18 to 19 year olds enter full-time higher education. Schools in England are supported from public funds paid to the local education authorities. These local education authorities are responsible for organizing the schools in their areas. Let's outline the basic features of public education in Britain. Firstly, there are wide variations between one part of the country and another. For most educational purposes England and Wales are treated as one unit, though the system in Wales is a little different from that of England. Scotland and Northern Ireland have their own education systems. Secondly, education in Britain mirrors the country's social system. Originally published in 1996, there still remains a public for Is There A Public For Public Schools? In this book, David Mathews reports on troublesome trends in public education, which suggest that the historical compact between Americans and their public schools is rapidly eroding. School reform e. See More Info. Tell us if something is incorrect.